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MAHĀBHĀRATA WITH ITS COMMENTARIES: BHĀRATABHĀVADĪPA AND BHĀRATATĀTPARYASAMGRAHA

T. GANESAN

One of the many grandest contributions of ancient Bhāratadeśa is the *Mahābhārata* which is the greatest literary corpus of the world. A storehouse of immortal wisdom for all the ages, the *Mahābhārata* has been sustaining the culture of this great land for millennia and still continues to be so in many ways.

Many great scholars have attempted to unravel the mysteries and underlying grand truths that lay scattered in this great Epic.

Appayya Dīkṣita of the mid 16th century who flourished in south India was a polymath who has attempted in his interpretative commentary *Bhārata-tātparya-saṅgraha* [1], to bring out the inner meanings and significance of some of the most important events and discussions in the epic.

Nīlakaṇṭha of the 17th century who flourished in Varanasi has written a commentary by name *Bhāratabhāvadīpa* [2] on the entire text of the *Mahābhārata* giving his own interpretations.

In this brief paper I will try to compare these two commentaries on some of the important issues and bring out their viewpoints.

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1 *Rāmāyaṇa-tātparya-saṅgrahaḥ* and *Bhārata-tātparya-saṅgrahaḥ* by Appayya Dīkṣita with his own Vyākhyā, Vanivilas Press, Srirnagam, 1929.

2 The *Mahābhārata,* with the com. of Nīlakaṇṭha (Anuśāsanaparva), Citraśālā Press, Pune, 1933.

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To take up the 'Śivasahasranāmastotra' as told by Kṛṣṇa: In the Anuśāsanaparva, ch. 14 (1cd, 2cd) we find that Yudhiṣṭhira requests Bhīṣma to tell him the great names of Śiva who is the Lord of Brahmā, the Pitāmaha and who is the Guru of both the gods and the demons (*surāsuragurave*) :

पितामहेशाय विभो नामान्याचक्ष्व शम्भवे ।।
सुरासुरगुरौ देवे शङ्करेऽव्यक्तयोनये ।।

The usage of *caturthīvibhakti* in this passage is in the sense of genitive (*ṣaṣṭhyartha*) as explained by the commentator Nīlakaṇṭha [3].

For this Bhīṣma answers that he is incapable of recounting the names and thereby the greatness of Śiva, as Śiva is the greatest of all gods, the creator and overlord of even Brahmā, Viṣṇu, etc. Bhīṣma then very briefly explains how Śiva creates Brahmā and others by first activating the Prakṛti and the Puruṣa through His power. Such a great God as He is, the greatness of Śiva can be expounded only by Nārāyaṇa, the invincible (*paramadurjaya*) who by His yogic eyes and devotion to Śiva (*rudrabhaktyā*) is capable of seeing great things[4]. Bhīṣma also substantiates this by stating that in each Yuga (*yuge yuge*) Kṛṣṇa has worshipped and satisfied Śiva by his intense devotion [5] and thus has seen directly the supreme power (*aiśvarya*) of Śiva and completely

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3 .... ईशाय अन्तर्यामिणे सर्वत्र षष्ट्यर्थे चतुर्थी शंसुखं भवत्यस्मान् इत्यर्थः ।

4 Anuśāsana, 14.9-10ab:

एष विद्वान् गुणश्रेष्ठो विष्णुः परमदुर्जयः ।
दिव्यचक्षुर्महातेजा वीक्ष्यते योगचक्षुषा ।।
रुद्रभक्त्या तु कृष्णेन जगद्व्याप्तं महात्मना ।

5 The following *Ṛgveda* passage (III.5.3.3) can be adduced to in support of Bhīṣma's statement that Kṛṣṇa [as Nārāyaṇa Viṣṇu] had worshipped Śiva before and attained greatness by Śiva's grace:

तव श्रिये मरुतो मर्जयन्त रुद्र यत् जनिम चारु चित्रम् ।
पदं यद् विष्णोरुपमं निधायि तेन पासि गुह्यं नाम गोनाम् ।।

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knows the highest manifestations and powers of Śiva (*vibhūtim ca māheśvarīm kārtsnyena*) (14.16):

एष शक्तो महाबाहुर्वक्तुं भगवतो गुणान् ।
विभूतिं चैव कात्स्न्येन सत्यां माहेश्वरीं नृप ।।

In explaining the passage (14.5 ab) :

अक्षरं परमं ब्रह्म असच्च सदसच्च यः ।

the commentator Nīlakaṇṭha digresses a little and introduces the concepts of rope and snake for explaining the words *sat* and *asat*. For him, *akṣaram* is the unchanging *Brahman* which is devoid of the three types of limitations (*pariccheda-traya-śūnya*); the same *Brahman* is *asat*, the cause that is unevolved (*avyākṛta*) and it is '*asat* ' like a non-existent snake appearing on a rope[6]. Here we can clearly see the Advaita Vedānta leanings of Nīlakaṇṭha. It is clear that the context and the content of the *Mahābhārata* passage do not yield to such an interpretation which Nīlakaṇṭha reads into it.

Again, while explaining the passage of the Anuśāsana parva, 14. 26, where Kṛṣṇa starts his narration of the names of Kapardī, namely, Śiva, after addressing the assembled Brāhmaṇas, Yudhiṣṭhira and Bhīṣma:

शुश्रूषध्वं ब्राह्मणेन्द्रास्त्वं च तात युधिष्ठिर।
त्वं चापगेय नामानि श्रृणुष्वेह कपर्दिने ।।

Nīlakaṇṭha states that Kapardī is only the *Saguṇa Brahman* since there are no names for the *Nirguṇa Brahman* [7]. Clearly the Advaita Vedānta predilections in Nīlakaṇṭha takes precedence here as there is no contextual

6 ... अक्षरं अपरिणामि परमं ब्रह्म अत्यन्तं परिच्छेदत्रयशून्यम् । तदेव असत् अव्याकृतद्रव्यं कारणम् । सत् रज्जुसर्पवद्भासमानमपि असत् अनिर्वचनीयमित्यर्थः ।।

7 गीतासु - 'तमेव चाद्यं पुरुषं प्रपद्ये', 'तमेव शरणं गच्छ' इति प्रोक्ताय कपर्दिने सगुणायैव। निर्गुणस्य तु गौणानां नाम्नामभावादित्यर्थः।।

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need to interpret the name Kapardī of Śiva as pertaining only to *Saguṇa Brahman.* It implies that for Nīlakaṇṭha, the commentator, these names of Śiva which Yudhiṣṭhira requests Bhīṣma to narrate to him and for which Kṛṣṇa takes so much effort by stating the occasion in which he received those hallowed names from sage Taṇḍī that were revealed in the Brahmaloka (Anu.14.19) and to recite which names Kṛṣṇa makes himself pure by touching the water (*upaspṛśya śucirbhūtvā,* Anu. 14. 25c) are only the names of *Saguṇa Brahman.* Probably Nīlakaṇṭha is swayed by the notion expressed in the Advaita Vedānta text, *Pañcadaśī* (6, Citradīpaprakaraṇam, vv. 236, 212) said to have been composed by Vidyāraṇya :

मायाख्यायाः कामधेनोर्वत्सौ जीवेश्वरावुभौ ।
यथेच्छं पिबतां द्वैतं तत्तत्वं त्वद्वैतमेव हि ।।

आनन्दमयविज्ञानमयावीश्वरजीवकौ ।
मायया कल्पितावेतौ ताभ्यां सर्वं प्रकल्पितम् ।।

This consigns the very concept of Īśvara along with that of *jīva* to the illusory domain and states that in the ultimate analysis the *saguṇa* aspect of *Brahman* is only a product of *māyā* and hence illusory. That this view which Nīlakaṇṭha foists on these passages of the *Mahābhārata* is not the basic purport of the *Mahābhārata* and much less of Bhīṣma is very much evident in the beginning verses of this chapter. Upon Yudhiṣṭhira's request to narrate him the glorious names of Śiva, Bhīṣma replies as follows in order to convey the supreme greatness of Śiva (14.3, 4ab,5) :

अशक्तोऽहं गुणान् वक्तुं महादेवस्य धीमतः ।
यो हि सर्वगतो देवो न च सर्वत्र दृश्यते ।।

ब्रह्मविष्णुसुरेशानां स्रष्टा च प्रभुरेव च ।
प्रकृतीनां परत्वेन पुरुषस्य च यः परः ।
अक्षरं परमं ब्रह्म असच्च सदसच्च यः ।।

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In these passages Śiva is clearly stated as the highest *Brahman* (*paramam brahma*) transcending the matter (*prakṛti*) as well as the selves (*puruṣa*) but at the same time becoming everything – the supreme cause as well as the manifested effect.

Here one may cite a similar passage

ऋतं सत्यं परं ब्रह्म पुरुषं कृष्णपिङ्गलम् ।
ऊर्ध्वरितं विरूपाक्षं विश्वरूपाय वै नमो नमः ।।

from the *Yājñikyupaniṣat* also known as *Mahānārāyaṇopaniṣat* (23) (*Taittirīya Āraṇyaka,* 10.23.1) where the epithet *param brahma* is used with regard to Śiva who is also referred to as Virūpākṣa, which is a special epithet that is applicable only to Śiva and to none else.

Also we may recall Kālidāsa's famous invocatory verse in the *Vikramorvaśīya* (I.ab):

वेदान्तेषु यमाहुरेकपुरुषं व्याप्य स्थितं रोदसी
यस्मिन्नीश्वर इत्यनन्यविषयः शब्दो यथार्थाक्षरः।

and the *Taittirīya Āraṇyaka* (X.16.1) passage,

सर्वो वै रुद्रस्तस्मै रुद्राय नमो अस्तु।
पुरुषो वै रुद्रः सन् महो नमो नमः ।

where the word '*puruṣa*' as the highest reality expounded in the Vedānta [texts], namely, the Upaniṣads, is used with regard to Śiva which usage also supports the view that the Vedānta corpus, according to Kālidāsa, did not envisage two levels of *Brahman* – *nirguṇa*, the highest and *saguṇa*, the lower one.

In the passages of the *Mahābhārata* under discussion nowhere do we find any mention or reference to two levels of *Brahman* – the *nirguṇa* as the highest and the *saguṇa* as the lower one – as propounded

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by Śaṅkara and others following him. As such the *Mahābhārata* passages under discussion are completely innocent of such a theory of two levels of *Brahman*. But Nīlakaṇṭha in his commentary reads these views in these passages showing his strong prejudice towards Advaita Vedānta views.[8]

Appayya Dīkṣita also brings out the inner meaning of many of the intricate points of the *Mahābhārata* and proves that the basic purport of the entire epic of *Mahābhārata* is to highlight the supreme and unique greatness of Śiva. He commences his *Bhārata-tātparya-saṅgraha (BTS)* by stating "Bādarāyaṇa, the author of *Mahābhārata*, himself an incarnation of Viṣṇu, inculcates in his great epic, *Mahābhārata*, the fact that Śiva is the highest truth and he does so by repeating this fact many a time" :

श्रीबादरायणमुनिः स्वयमेव विष्णुः पार्थच्छलात् तमधिकृत्य कृते प्रबन्धे ।
तस्यापि नित्यमहितं शशिभूषण त्वामाम्रेडयन् गुरुरदर्शयदादितत्त्वम् ।।

As instances, Appayya Dīkṣita lists out various portions of the vast epic where the supreme greatness (*mahimātiśaya*) of Śiva are recounted in a detailed fashion.

The Droṇaparva which elaborates the event of Nārāyaṇa. In the Vanaparva (the Tīrthayātra section), where many holy places related to Śiva are enumerated such as Damī, Rudrakoṭi, Suparṇa, Mahākāla, Śrīparvata and many more – the Suparṇa is the Śaiva holy place where Viṣṇu worshipped Śiva and obtained many boons; the Damītīrtha (Prabhīti according to Appayya Dīkṣita) is the one where Viṣṇu worshipped Śiva as an act of expiation (*prāyaścitta*) in order to get

8 We can easily note that he cites the works of Śaṅkara, Sureśvara, Vācaspatimiśra, Vidyāraṇya, Sadānanda, Sarvajñātman, and others belonging to the Advaita school as sources of authority.

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himself free from the sins of killing the Asuras and Rākṣasas who were the enemies of the gods. Appayya Dīkṣita, citing the passage from the Anuśāsanaparva (14.232) :

यस्य ब्रह्मा च विष्णुश्च त्वं च शक्र सहामरैः।
अर्चयध्वे सदा लिङ्गं तस्मात् पूज्यतरो हि सः ।।

according to which there is none greater than Śiva whose Liṅga is worshipped by Brahmā, Viṣṇu, Indra and all other gods, states that it is conclusively established that Brahmā, Viṣṇu and all other gods daily perform Śivapūjā [9]. Appayya Dīkṣita concludes that from the foregone discussion, the *Mahābhārata* conveys the greatness of Kṛṣṇa as its general meaning and by its implied sense (*vyañjanāvṛttī*) establishes the highest supremacy of Śiva who is worshipped with intense devotion even by Viṣṇu[10], in his incarnation as Kṛṣṇa, as evidenced by such numerous narrative episodes found in the epic referred earlier[11]

Appayya Dīkṣita (*BTS*, p.54) continues further that the *Mahābhārata* is actually a Kāvya as said by Vyāsa to Brahmā by the statement,

कृतं मयेदं भगवान् काव्यं परमम् ।

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9 *BTS*. p.54 : ब्रह्मविष्ण्वादीनां नित्यमेव शिवाराधकत्वं स्पष्टीकृतम् ।

10 *loc.cit* : श्रीकृष्णस्य शिवपूजनेन ... तत्पूज्यस्य शिवस्य यत्पारम्यं व्यञ्जनावृत्त्या प्रतीयते।

11 The following hymn addressed by Kṛṣṇa to Śiva can be cited as example from among many with which the Anuśāsanaparva abounds, where Kṛṣṇa prays to Śiva for a staunch and firm mind devoted to *dharma* (*dharmedṛḍhatvam*), free inclination towards Yoga (*yogapriyatvam*), invincibility in battles (*yudhi śatrughātam*), undiminished fame (*yaśas*) and above all, eternal proximity to Śiva (*tava sannikarṣam*) (15.1-2):

मूर्ध्ना निपत्य नियतस्तेजः सन्निचये ततः । परमं हर्षमागम्य भागवन्तमथाब्रुवम् ।।
धर्मे दृढत्वं युधि शत्रुघातं यशस्तथाग्र्यं परमं बलं च ।
योगप्रियत्वं तव सन्निकर्षं वृणे सुतानां च शतं शतानि।।

One may note here in passing that Vyāsa being the greatest *kavi*, as mentioned earlier, remarks here " the lotus-eyed, *padmākṣa*, namely Kṛṣṇa venerated the three-eyed [God Virūpākṣa] with great devotion"– पद्माक्षस्तं विरूपाक्षमभितुष्टाव भक्तिमान् ।

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And this Kāvya is of the highest order according to both Vyāsa and Brahmā.[12] When this is the case to Appayya Dīkṣita, such a Kāvya of the highest type (*uttamakāvya*) should naturally have a central and superior meaning (*vācyātiśāyi*) to be conveyed through its implied sense (*vyañjanāvṛtti*) and the unsurpassed greatness of Śiva is the implied meaning of the entire epic of *Mahābhārata*. Appayya Dīkṣita continues to say[13] that while the epic speaks about the greatness of Nārāyaṇa at many places the same epic at so many places clearly portrays Śiva as the highest Lord fit to be worshipped even by Nārāyaṇa (*tasyāpi pūjyatayā*) which is the suggested meaning, the *vastudhvani*.[14]

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12 We may also mention that the literary theorists in medieval Kashmir, especially Ānandavardhana (9th century) and Kuntaka (late 10th century), considered the *Mahābhārata*, a model of literary expression, an example of a poem that successfully produced the aesthetic sentiment of tranquility (*śāntarasa*) in an experienced reader.

13 *BTS*. p.55: अस्य उत्कृष्टस्य चोत्तमकाव्यस्य वाच्यातिशायि यद्व्यङ्ग्यमस्ति तदेव प्रधानम् । न तु वाच्यम् । . . . इह तु वाच्यः परब्रह्मत्वसंभावनावहो नारायणस्य निरतिशयमहिमा । तस्यापि पूज्यतया सर्वत्र निबद्धस्य शिवस्य तदतिशायिसगुणमपरब्रह्मभावरूपो महिमा व्यज्यमानः । अयमेव वस्तुध्वनिरूपः ।।

14 We may cite as an instance the greatness of Śiva explained by Vyāsa to Pāṇḍavas: In the Droṇaparva we see that after the death of Droṇa, Arjuna sees sage Vyāsa and tells him what he has been encountering during the battle: 'In the battle field I continuously encounter a divinely brilliant person moving before me with his hands raised holding a *triśūla* and in whichever direction he moves there my enemies fall down dead. In fact all those enemies have already been killed by that divine person but people think that I had killed them all' (Droṇa, 202.4-8):

संग्रामे निघ्नतः शत्रूञ्शरौघैर्विमलैरहम् । अग्रतो लक्षयेयान्तं पुरुषं पावकप्रभम् ।।
ज्वलन्तं शूलम् उद्यम्य यां दिशं प्रतिपद्यते । तस्यां दिशि विशीर्यन्ते शत्रवो मे महामुने ।।
न पद्भ्यां स्पृशते भूमिं न च शूलं विमुञ्चति । शूलाच्छूलसहस्राणि निष्पेतुस्तस्य तेजसा ।।
तेन भग्नान् अरीन् सर्वान् मद्भग्नान् मन्यते जनः । तेन दग्धानि सैन्यानि पृष्ठतोऽनुदहाम्यहम् ।।
भगवंस्तन्ममाचक्ष्व को वै स पुरुषोत्तमः । शूलपाणिर्महान् कृष्ण तेजसा सूर्यसन्निभः ।।

For which Vyāsa replies that that great person was none other than Lord Śiva (Droṇa, 202,9-11, 18cd) :

प्रजापतीनां प्रथमं तैजसं पुरुषं विभुम् । भुवनं भूर्भुवं देवं सर्वलोकेश्वरं प्रभुम् ।।
ईशानं वरदं पार्थ दृष्टवानसि शङ्करम् । तं गच्छ शरणं देवं सर्वार्दिं भुवनेश्वरम् ।।
महादेवं महात्मानम् ईशानं जटिलं शिवम् । त्र्यक्षं महाभुजं रुद्रं शिखिनं चीरवाससम् ।।
दातारं चैव भक्तानां प्रसादविहितान् वरान् ।

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Appayya Dīkṣita substantiates his view by citing many passages from the Ānuśāsanaparva (14.408-10)[15], Śāntiparva[16] which passages according to him just corroborate the *Taittirīyopaniṣat* passage – यतो वा इमानि भूतानि जायन्ते . . . ।।

We may notice that Appayya Dīkṣita is also alive to the fact that at some places in the *Mahābhārata*, Śiva in the form of Rudra [in fact Nīlalohita Rudra], Samhārarudra, Sthāṇu, etc. is spoken to have been created by Brahmā in order to assist him in the maintenance of the created universe and at other places to have come out of Nārāyaṇa. Appayya Dīkṣita clarifies that these instances only speak about various manifestations of Śiva at a lesser level and these passages do not mean the supreme Śiva, the unique, highest and immutable source of the entire universe as we have noted earlier.[17]

As another instance of comparing the interpretations of Nīlakaṇṭha and Appayya Dīkṣita we may refer to the interpretation of the following verse that occurs in the beginning of the Ādiparva (I.111) :

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15 Kṛṣṇa's hymn to Śiva upon His appearing before him after getting pleased by Kṛṣṇa's staunch devotion and severe penance:
त्वं वै ब्रह्मा च रुद्रश्च वरुणोऽग्निर्मनुर्भवः । धाता त्वष्टा विधाता च त्वं प्रभुः सर्वतो मुखः ।।
त्वत्तो जातानि भूतानि स्थावराणि चराणि च । त्वमादिः सर्वभूतानां संहारश्च त्वमेव हि ।।
ये चेन्द्रियार्थाश्च मनश्च कृत्स्नं ये वायवः सप्त तथैव चाग्निः।
ये वा दिविस्था देवताश्चापि पुंसां तस्मात्परं त्वामृषयो वदन्ति ।।

16 *BTS.* p.64:
यं विष्णुरिन्द्रः शम्भुश्च ब्रह्मा लोकपितामहः। स्तुवन्ति विविधैः स्तोत्रैर्देवदेवं महेश्वरम् ।।
तमर्चयन्ति ये शश्वद् दुर्गाण्यतितरन्ति ते । . . . . . ।।
ईश्वरश्चेतनः कर्ता पुरुषः कारणः शिवः । विष्णुर्ब्रह्मा शशी सूर्यः शक्रो देवाश्च सान्वयाः ।।
सृज्यते ग्रस्यते चैव तमोभूतमिदं यदा । अप्रज्ञातं जगत् सर्वं तदा ह्येको महेश्वरः ।।

17 *BTS.* p.70:
श्रीमहाभारते खलु श्रीसाम्बशिवः त्रिमूर्त्युत्तीर्णः त्रिमूर्त्यादिः कृत्स्नस्यापि चराचरस्य प्रपञ्चस्य स्रष्टा पाता नियन्ता संहर्ता समाराधनीयश्च प्रतिपन्नः।

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युधिष्ठिरो धर्ममयो महाद्रुमः स्कन्धोऽर्जुनो भीमसेनोऽस्य शाखाः।
माद्री सुतौ पुष्पफले समृद्धे मूलं कृष्णो ब्रह्म च ब्राह्मणाश्च ।।

This verse metaphorically compares Yudhiṣṭhira to a tree of *dharma* whose main trunk is Arjuna, Bhīmasena the branches, Nakula and Sahadeva, the flowers and fruits, the root of the tree being Kṛṣṇa, Brahma and the Brāhmaṇas. Here Nīlakaṇṭha interprets the word *'Brahma'* as the Veda as it is the source of *yajña* and the supreme knowledge.

Appayya Dīkṣita interprets the word '*Brahma*' as meaning Śiva: For, according to him though Veda is the indirect source for the Pāṇḍavas to get back their kingdom, it is not proper to find an inanimate object, namely the Vedas, in the list of persons counted in the verse mentioned above.[18]

Therefore, Appayya Dīkṣita concludes that on the strength of many passages spread in the epic (of which we have referred to some above), it is but correct to say that the word '*Brahman*' denotes Śiva. As discussed above, at many places in the *Mahābhārata* we do find Śiva as *Brahman*, the supreme reality.

Thus we have seen briefly the interpretative style and basic philosophical orientations of two of the important commentators, Appayya Dīkṣita and Nīlakaṇṭha, on the *Mahābhārata* by taking a few passages of the epic as a sample.

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18 *BTS.* p.63 :

ब्रह्मपदोक्तेन ब्रह्मपदार्थेन तद्राज्यप्राप्तिकारिणा भवितव्यम् । वेदतपस्वी यद्यपि राज्यप्राप्तिहेतुधर्मानुष्ठान-प्रमितिद्वारेणापूर्वद्वारेण च तद्राज्यप्राप्तिकारी तथापि तेन मध्यपाठो नाचेतनयोर्युक्तः, प्रायपाठविरोधात् । अतः शिव एव तत्र ब्रह्मपदेनोक्तो ज्ञायते ।

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